

# LEARNING ABOUT YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FROM THE NFTY SURVEY: AN INTERPRETATIVE ESSAY

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Throughout our lives, our understanding about how the world works and our place in the world entwine with our sense of our own emotional and behavioral capacity and habits, as well as with our sense of community (Ben-Avie, in press). Thus, youth development is often framed in terms of cognitions, emotions, actions, and partaking of community. In what ways is this framework helpful in understanding Reform Jewish youth? In what ways do the results from the *NFTY Survey* contribute to our understanding of youth development among North American Jewish teenagers?

## **Youth Development and Influentials**

Youth who feel that many adults care about them tend to have the highest levels of development and the fewest interpersonal relationship challenges. This statement is based on a study of 2,232 public high school students in a Connecticut city (Ben-Avie, 2004). One of the 125 items in the *Learning and Development Inventory* (Ben-Avie, Brown, Steinfeld, Ensign, 2004) asked students to indicate approximately how many adults in their lives (at home, at school, in the community) care about what happens to them. Students who indicated “zero adults” had significantly lower scores on overall

development than students who indicated a number greater than zero. Students who indicated either “13–25 adults” or “more than 25 adults” reported the fewest interpersonal relationship challenges, significantly differing from the other students. (*Note:* this public school comparison group is reasonable because 86 percent of the NFTY respondents attend public school).

Among NFTY teenagers, 54 percent indicated that between 11 and 30 adults care about what happens to them. An additional 18 percent indicated a number greater than 30 adults. The comparison public school sample had more young people at the lower end of the scale than the NFTY teenagers; 42 percent of the comparison students indicated 12 or fewer adults vs. 36 percent of the NFTY teenagers. Still, more than a third of NFTY teenagers indicated a number on the lower end of the scale. All the more so, it is important to consider the relationships between NFTY teenagers and adults.

Of the NFTY respondents, 46 percent agreed that they seek advice when making a decision about their future from a Jewish adult because they want a Jewish perspective. Moreover, 56 percent agreed that there is at least one adult in their congregations to whom they can ask “an embarrassing question” if they want to (*Note:* the youth were not asked to specify which “adult”). Seeking adult guidance is not only an effective problem-solving strategy, but also an indicator of healthy development.

Also, 91 percent agreed to the following statement: “The person (or people) in my TYG and congregation who supports and guides me as a Jew also guides me in non-Jewish areas of my life, too.” To understand the implications of the results, it is worthwhile to widen the frame for a moment. Youth development occurs in specific contexts and is influenced by group life events (for example, the Holocaust, the war in

Iraq). Enculturation and socialization of the young into the Jewish people was in the past a guided process of the learning of the sacred texts and ways of the community. Adults guided the process, and youth rarely had direct access to information. (For example, schools still tend to mediate young people's access to information through the use of textbooks and other instructional methodologies.) Today, North American youth have direct access to information. Therefore, their cognitions—what they think about and the conceptual frameworks that they use to interpret all the information that they encounter—are increasingly not touched by adult mediation. And yet, the developmental needs of youth have not changed. Thus, it is noteworthy that 90 percent of the NFTY respondents indicated that their friends “support and guide them as Jews” and only 62 percent indicated their teachers. (*Note*: the youth were not asked to indicate whether the “friends” and “teachers” were affiliated with their TYGs and congregational schools). Parents, Rabbis, and TYG advisors had similar scores (81 to 84 percent) and, interestingly, a “member of the congregation” elicited 67 percent agreement. This finding is interesting in light of 85 percent also agreed with the following statement: “At least one adult in my congregation inspires me to learn more about Judaism.” This adult in the congregation is apparently not the cantor. The cantor had the lowest level of agreement in terms of who “supports and guides them as Jews.” In addition, only 30 percent agreed that the cantor encourages young people to participate in NFTY regional and North American events; By way of contrast, 74 percent agreed that the Rabbi does so. Seventy-three percent indicated the education director and/or youth director (*Note*: the survey asked about the “education director and/or youth director” even though these positions are often held by two separate individuals).

Within the specific “developmental niche” of NFTY, the youth encounter their advisors in their official capacity as adults responsible for their enculturation and socialization on behalf of the URJ and their congregations. The youth perceive the advisors as adults who care whether they are good people (88 percent agreement), and who expect them to get along well with each other (91 percent agreement). The youth consider the advice of their youth directors and advisors (93 percent agreed that “When my youth director and/or advisor offers suggestions about how I can improve, I listen to and consider what they are saying”), and the youth tend to feel comfortable around the adults in their TYGs (88 percent agreement). With this, 7 percent indicated that their advisors sometimes speak to them in a demeaning way. It was unexpected that only 53 percent agreed that “My advisor pushes me to accomplish more than I had ever thought possible.” One interpretation of this finding is that the youth already hold high appraisals of their capacity for accomplishment. Another interpretation is that the youth and their advisors tend to interact about programming, and do not tend to enter into relationships with one another. A third interpretation is that the advisors are not prepared—through no fault of their own—to understand the way learning and development are connected, and how to create conditions that promote interactions that lead to desirable cognitions, emotions, actions, and partaking of community among almost all the youth.

### **Expanding the Frame: Learning More About the Youth**

Knowledge of youth development enables adults to see beyond the glimpse of their inner selves that youth provide to their advisors and other educators. Whereas the advisors and other educators may see the actions or behavior of the youth, the cognitions

and emotions of the youth may remain out-of-sight. *One method of expanding the frame of what we know about the youth, of enlarging the glimpse, is to learn about the youth in as many settings as possible.* Consider that 57 percent of the NFTY respondents indicated that last camp that they attended was an URJ sleep-away camp, and 22 percent another Jewish camp. Moreover, 33 percent of the respondents indicated that they are involved in family education programs in their congregations. Those youth who tend to participate in NFTY regional events, also tend to go to an URJ sleep-away camp [ $r = .397, p = < .001$ ]. Moreover, those youth who are enrolled in family education tend to be more involved in the life of their congregations (e.g., committees): [ $r = .337, p = < .001$ ].

**Involvement in the Life of Congregation (Active Role in Services) BY Participation in an URJ Sleep-Away Camp**

		URJ Sleep-Away Camp		Total
		No	Yes	
Active Role	No	69	64	133
	Yes	98	152	250
Total		167	216	383

**Participation in NFTY regional events and participation in an URJ Sleep-Away Camp**

		Since I have been participating in my TYG, I have attended approximately the following number of NFTY regional events:					
		none	1-3	4-6	7-9	10 or more	Total
URJ camp	No	12	52	45	28	30	167
	Yes	6	47	42	38	84	219
Total		18	99	87	66	114	386

Three quarters (77 percent) are enrolled in a Post-B'nei Mizvah education program (e.g., Hebrew High School, Confirmation, Midrasha). In the following tables, enrollment in these programs are presented by grade, gender, whether a parent or close relative is a

professional leader in Jewish communal life, and involvement in the Congregational Religious School.

***Enrollment in a Post-B'nei Mizvah Education Program (Hebrew High School, Confirmation, Midrasha):***

**By GRADE**

	9	10	11	12
No	11	6	36	37
Yes	51	99	89	68
Total	62	105	125	105

**By GENDER**

	GENDER		Total
	female	male	
No	66	29	95
Yes	235	85	320
Total	301	114	415

**By Whether Parent or Close Relative is a Professional Leader in Jewish Communal Life**

	One of my parents or close relatives works as a professional leader in Jewish communal life:		Total
	No	Yes	
No	73	22	95
Yes	220	99	319
Total	293	121	414

**By Whether NFTY Teen has a Role in the Religious School**

	Role in the Religious School		Total
	No	Yes	
No	46	46	92
Yes	63	255	318
Total	109	301	410

NFTY teens appear exceptionally involved in Jewish study in comparison to the enrollment patterns identified in the URJ Portraits of Learning Study. For example, respondents were asked to consider this question: "In a typical year, of all the young people who are old enough to attend a sleep-away camp, the following percentage attends an URJ sleep-away camp."

- Fifty percent of the congregations indicated less than 10 percent of their eligible youth attend an URJ sleep-away camp.
- 30 percent indicated that between 11-20 percent of their youth do so.
- 11 percent indicated that between 21-30 percent of their youth do so.

Thus, it would have been expected that between approximately 5 percent and 30 percent of the NFTY teens would have attended this type of camp. Actually, 57 percent did so.

It is worthwhile to query regarding the level of contact among the camp counselors, educators of family education programs, teachers of Post Bar/Bat Mitzvah education programs, and NFTY advisors. Within congregations, coordinated planning tends not to occur among the various education programs and committees. According to the URJ Portraits of Learning Study, in less than half of the congregations (42 percent) is education a "holistic effort with one overall committee." As a movement, URJ is diffusing its collective energies and thereby minimizing the potential impact it could have on the developmental trajectories of the youth. This finding from the URJ Portraits of Learning Study sheds light on the response of the NFTY teens to an item that was designed as an "outcome" variable: Only a quarter of the NFTY respondents strongly agreed that "When planning for college, one of my highest values is finding a campus with an energetic Reform group." Of course, the 9th graders had lower scores on this

item than the 12<sup>th</sup> graders [ $f(3,389) = 4.493, p = .004$ ]. However, this is the only difference that was observed.

A complementary configuration of education emerges through “recreating community.” In a functioning community, there is a common language that is shared among educators and parents of adolescents which enables educational program designers, administrators, parents, and community members to align activities and curricular units with the aspects of development that they most desire to promote (Ben-Avie, in press). However, the URJ Portraits of Learning Study revealed that only 13 percent of congregational schools tend to include “youth development as it relates to student learning” on the agenda of their staff meetings. Moreover, only 22 percent strongly agreed that “Our congregation sets clear expectations in formal and informal educational programs for the specific Jewish values that are important to promote among the students” (another 50 percent indicated “agreed”).

### **TYGs and Judaism**

When the NFTY teens appraised their TYGs, the responses were far more positive than could have been predicted. NFTY engages them and the teens feel a strong sense of belonging. Their scores on the items that measure their adherence to the Jewish people, past and present, tell another story. In other words, they consider NFTY wonderful and they are more ambivalent about Judaism. The degree to which they have formed a strong relationship to the Jewish people is an important area of inquiry because youth development is comprised of cognitions, emotions, actions, and partaking of



community. And Judaism has the potential to simultaneously engage youth in all their aspects of development.

Consider the five items that had the highest scores on the scale that measures teens' adherence to the Jewish people. The item that had the highest score was designed to measure their emotional attachment to the Jewish people: "I take pride in what Jewish people have done for the world" (95 percent agreement). It is worthy noting that "taking pride" does not necessarily require any action above and beyond the emotional response. The second highest item tapped not only into the respondents' positive appraisals of their TYGs, but also sense of community: "One of the reasons why I like being involved in my TYG is because I am among Jews here" (92 percent agreement). The third highest item reflects URJ's commitment to social action (only 9 percent agreed that "I cannot see myself volunteering often because I am the type of person who is always busy with a lot of activities."). The remaining two items in the top five are interesting. Again, one of the items was designed to measure the teens' emotional attachment: "I get angry when anyone says anything bad about the Jewish people" (88 percent agreement). The other item that also elicited 88 percent agreement was the following: "I don't think much about God." While the act of thinking is clearly a cognition, thinking about God could affect all the teenagers' sense and mental faculties.

It is for this reason that the responses of the youth to the items that deal with T'fillot (prayer) were not as positive as expected. Consider the following responses: "Actively participating in T'fillot in my TYG is important to me" (66 percent agreement), "The services in my TYG are run in a way that allows me to learn how to pray" (58 percent agreement), "Often enough, T'fillot in my TYG stir my emotions in a positive

way” (63 percent agreement), and “Watching my peers pray at TYG events makes me think that praying is very important” (55 percent agreement).

In order to discern whether those who identified themselves as leaders of their TYGs had scores that were different in any way, an analysis was conducted. The following lists all those instances in which a statistically significant (“nonchance”) difference was observed between the TYG leaders and the rest of the respondents to the survey. In all cases, the TYG leaders had higher scores.

- One of the reasons why I like being involved in my TYG is because I am among Jews here ( $p = .013$ ).
- In the future, I will make sure to follow Jewish laws (for example, participating in religious services, observing the Sabbath, eating kosher food) ( $p = .047$ ).
- I take pride in what Jewish people have done for the world ( $p = .012$ ).
- I read Jewish websites, books, magazines ( $p = .009$ ).
- I listen to Jewish or Israeli music ( $p = .002$ ).
- I feel connected to worldwide Jewry because I am learning the same things and celebrating the same holidays that Jewish teens are learning and celebrating all over the world ( $p = .014$ ).
- I get angry when someone says anything bad about the Jewish people ( $p = .013$ ).
- Praying is an important activity in my life now ( $p = .031$ ).
- I don’t think much about God ( $p = .013$ ).

- Activity participating in T'fillot (religious services) in my TYG is important to me ( $p = .001$ ).
- Often enough, T'fillot (religious services) in my TYG stir my emotions in a positive way ( $p = .033$ ).
- Watching my peers pray at TYG events makes me think that praying is very important ( $p = .05$ ).

In general, the Judaic learning sessions of the TYGs are positively appraised by all the youth. When asked to indicate the content of the learning sessions in which they learned a lot ("what's going on in the learning session both challenges and really interests me"), they following received the high scores: Tikkun Olam, Social Action, Israel, Leadership, Jews and pop culture, Jewish values. Studying Torah and Jewish sacred texts (54 percent agreement) and Hebrew language studies (64 percent agreement) had the lowest scores. It is noteworthy that in every instance on this scale in which a statistically significant difference was found between the scores of the males and females, the females had higher scores.

## **Gender Balance**

The finding that the females had consistently higher scores on the scale that measures their assessments of the Judaic learning sessions raises the question of whether there is a gender balance in NFTY. In the URJ Portraits of Learning Study, a quarter of the congregations (24.8 percent) agreed that "When considering all of our different educational programs for school-aged students, I would say that on the whole we tend to have more girls than boys." (*Note: the question asked about "school-aged students," and did not ask about particular age groups; for example, high school students*). Only a third

of the respondents to the NFTY Survey indicated that the genders in their TYGs were balanced (48 percent indicated “slightly more female” and 10 percent indicated “almost all female”). Several possible reasons why this could be the case were presented to the respondents who replied in the affirmative to the above question. Two of the reasons were also included in the NFTY Survey. The responses are comparable.

- According to the NFTY respondents, 10 percent agreed that the activities are geared toward female teens. In the URJ Portraits of Learning Study, 8 percent agreed.
- According to the NFTY respondents, 24 percent agreed that “In my congregation, female teens are less likely to put Jewish activities aside in favor of other extracurricular activities.” In the URJ Portraits of Learning Study, 27 percent agreed.

It is worth noting in passing that although the NFTY teens tended to disagree that the activities were geared toward females, 72 percent of the respondents to the survey were female.

The NFTY Survey also included sections that were designed to learn more about the overall development of the youth. The survey design team hoped to enlarge the glimpse that the youth share of themselves during NFTY activities. In this way, NFTY advisors could take into consideration all aspects of youth development when planning activities (that is, the active promotion of “whole child” development).

## Active Promotion of Youth Development: Interpersonal Relations Among Youth

Consider interpersonal relations among the youth. Of the respondents to the NFTY Survey, 77 percent agreed that "I separate myself from a group of people my age if they are doing something I do not want to do." Among a comparison group of Jewish youth ( $n=294$ ) there was an agreement rate of 61 percent. The difference was statistically significant, that is, not due to chance: [ $t(696) = 6.107, p = .001$ ]. Moreover, only half of the comparison youth indicated that if some other kids are going to do something harmful, they tell someone who can help. Among NFTY teens, the agreement rate was higher (63 percent agreement), and this difference was not due to chance: [ $t(702) = 5.392, p = .001$ ]. Still, it is a red flag that about a quarter of NFTY teens did not agree that they separate themselves from a group of people their age if they are doing something that they do not want to do.

In this context, it is also worthwhile to note that 18 percent of the NFTY teens agreed that "This TYG could really use help in making sure that teens are not targeted by other teens for any reason." Also, 13 percent also indicated that "Because of the way some students treat me, I often feel excluded." It would have been expected that those who agreed to the first statement were the ones who agreed to the second statement, too. This, however, was not the case. A very weak correlation was observed ( $r = .205, p = .001$ ). On the other side of the equation, NFTY teens concur that "In general, my advisor stops teens from verbally or physically bullying other teens" (79 percent agreement) and that "In general, my advisor expects us to get along well" (91 percent agreement). A clear indicator that NFTY teens feel emotionally safe in their TYGs is their response to the following item: "In my TYG, I try to hide my feelings from everyone." Only 1 percent

strongly agreed and 4 percent agreed. By way of contrast, 16 percent of the comparison group of Jewish youth strongly agreed or agreed to this statement. This difference was statistically significant: [ $t(717) = -11.942, p = .001$ ].

The above-mentioned items deal with interpersonal relations among youth in their TYGs, that is, when youth are physically present with each other in the same geographic location. What about online? Nineteen percent of the NFTY respondents agreed with this item: "I have sent an online communication that I later learned was perceived as negative by the receiver."

### **Active Promotion of Youth Development: NFTY Teens' Relationships with their TYG Advisors and the Level of Their Future Orientation**

The NFTY teens were also asked to respond to this item: "MY TYG is helping me to achieve my goals." Sixty-six percent agreed. In addition to interpersonal relations among youth, another key aspect of youth development is whether the teens are oriented to the future (and take the steps in the here-and-now to achieve that future). In our research, we have found that Future Orientation is one of the most important predictors of the consistent demonstration of attributes that contribute to high academic achievement and desired qualities in new hires (Ben-Avie et al., 2003). We define Future Orientation as the ability to conceive of one's own development.

The survey design team added to the NFTY Survey the following indicators of the level of the students' Future Orientation. The responses of the NFTY teens were compared to those of collected in a study of 1,436 Jewish and non-Jewish students in a New England public school system (Ben-Avie, 2006).

- *When I set goals, I usually follow all the way through to complete them.* NFTY teen tended to have significantly higher scores than the comparison group: [ $t(693) = 7.063, p = .001$ ].
- *I have a fairly clear idea of what I need to study now in order to have the career that I want.* NFTY teens tended to have lower scores than the comparison group, but the difference could have been due to chance. [ $t(691) = -605, p = .546$ ].
- *I have a clear image of what I will be doing in about 4 years.* NFTY teens tended to have lower scores than the comparison group, and this difference was not due to chance: [ $t(693) = -2.376, p = .015$ ].
- *I spend a lot of time planning for the future.* NFTY teen tended to have significantly higher scores than the comparison group: [ $t(688) = 3.433, p = .001$ ].

On two items, the NFTY teens tended to have lower scores than the comparison group. It is, therefore, noteworthy that those who attended a NFTY North American Convention tended to have statistically significant higher scores than those who did not on two items that measure Future Orientation:

- I have a fairly clear idea of what I need to study now in order to have the career that I want. [ $f(2, 401) = 4.921, p = .008$ ]
- I have a clear image of what I will be doing in about 4 years. [ $f(2, 402) = 3.226, p = .041$ ]

An additional analysis was conducted to discern whether students would have difference scores based on their grade level. In only once instance was this case: the 9<sup>th</sup> graders had

significantly higher scores on this item: "I have a clear image of what I will be doing in about 4 years." [ $f(3,385) = 3.595, p = .014$ ] This finding, of course, makes a great deal of sense.

A clear pattern did not emerge in terms of the NFTY teens' level of Future Orientation. One interpretation is that the youth are used to being "spectators" in their own development. As our colleague Valerie Maholmes (2004) writes: "Students should not be passive bystanders in their own development" (p. 50). Learning and development are not spectator sports. Children who engage in educationally-purposeful activities and put forth the effort to enhance their growth along all the pathways will experience balanced development. Since early childhood for too many contemporary North American youth, adults have scheduled and programmed activities for them. Hence they have not developed the self-regulation that is required to conceive of their own future development and take instrumental actions in the here-and-now to achieve their most desired developmental outcomes.

In this context, it is noteworthy that about a quarter (23 percent) of the NFTY teens did not agree with this statement: "I would say that the advisor helps us plan events rather than plans events for us." A far more important finding deals with the NFTY teens' level of future orientation and whether they feel that their TYG advisor "supports and guides me as a Jew." Those who indicated that, yes, their TYG advisors support and guide them as Jews had higher scores on this item: "When I set goals, I usually follow all the way through to complete them" [ $t(398) = -2.714, p = .007$ ]. They also had higher scores on this item: "I have a fairly clear idea of what I need to study now in order to have the career that I want" [ $t(398) = -3.095, p = .002$ ].



At the beginning of this essay, we noted that youth who feel that many adults care about them tend to have the highest levels of development and the fewest interpersonal relationship challenges. NFTY teens were asked to respond to the following item: "About this many adults in my life—at home plus at school plus in the community—care about what happens to me." From the number of adults indicated by the NFTY teens, three groups were computed: low ( $n = 119$ , 32 percent), medium ( $n = 130$ , 35 percent), and high ( $n = 123$ , 33 percent). These three groups tended to differ in terms of the nature and quality of the relationships they have with their TYG advisors. In all the following instances, those who indicated that many adults care about what happens to them (the "high" group) tended to have higher scores that were not due to chance: [e.g.,  $f(2, 365) = 3.217, p = .041$ ]

- When I am having family problems, there is a youth director or advisor in my TYG who will discuss with me what can be done to help.
- I know that if I have a problem with a teacher during the school day, I can talk about the problem with at least one adult in my TYG.
- I would say that the advisor helps us plan events rather than plans events for us.
- My advisor is helping me become a better communicator.
- My advisor cares whether I am a good person.
- When my youth director and/or advisor offers suggestions about how I can improve, I listen to and consider what they are saying.

It is noteworthy that according to the URJ Portraits of Learning Study 31 percent of the congregations do not have a youth director, 54 percent have a part-time youth director, and only 15 percent have a youth director who is full-time.

### **URJ and Active Promotion of Youth's Learning and Development**

To investigate the potential lifepaths of NFTY teens, the whole fabric of their "developmental niche" needs to be taken into account. The research and insights of Vygotsky, a Jew who lived in the former Soviet Union during the time of the Soviet Revolution, provides a helpful framework to interpreting findings from the URJ Portraits of Learning Study that have implications for NFTY.

Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been misinterpreted. The ZPD was not about the way in which the child may be "scaffolded" to the next level on specific activities with the help of teachers and more advanced peers. ZPD dealt with the topic of assessment: whether we look at why children have become as they are *or* look at how their future development may be promoted. The basic message of the zone, according to Valsiner is the "interdependence of the process of child development and the socially provided sources for that development" (Valsiner, cited in Moll, p. 4).

For NFTY teens, the "socially provided sources for their development" include the configuration of education in their home congregations. Fortunately, the URJ Portraits of Learning Study provides a glimpse of the nature of the configuration of education that the youth encounter.

The following comments provide a view of NFTY (and the challenges facing NFTY) from the perspective of the congregations:

- Even though we are a small congregation, we have an active NFTY group that plans at least one activity each month.
- It is hard to evaluate our program. For several years, some teenagers of the congregation have participated in community-sponsored BBYO programs. We are currently looking at resurrecting NFTY in our temple.
- I wish I could get our kids involved with NFTY. A decision was made years ago to go with Young Judea because we are a joint school.
- In our small Jewish community, a decision was made years ago to support only BBYO for our Reform and Conservative congregations. It is quite active. We are currently exploring a way to have our Temple students affiliate with NFTY so that they can be involved with these activities. NFTY has been very helpful with our situation.
- Our group has not been functioning at all for several years. Great effort has been made in the past ten years to revitalize the group. Efforts have paid off and we now have a vital, active NFTY board. Our teens attend regional and national events.
- Our TYG continues to have low membership and recruitment difficulties. There is a strong BBYO presence in our community and many of our teens participate in BBYO instead.

- Our youth group (along with our post Bar/Bat Mitzvah program), while once fairly strong, has deteriorated over the last ten-ish years. Both are currently struggling.
- Our youth group is only 4 years old and has grown from 4 to 70 teens. We see that this has helped in retention of 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders. We are unbelievably proud of our Youth Group.
- Our youth group is our saving grace. We have two wonderful and beloved youth group directors who are earning . . . a laughable amount that doesn't even cover their expenses. They have put on an award-winning camp for underprivileged children that our youth group members "live" for. They fund-raise for the camp the entire year, and then pay more than \$100 to become counselors.
- We have a harder time attracting boys—it is easier to convince girls to participate.
- This is the first year in a long while that we have hired a youth group director, whose goal[s] it will be to bring our youth group into NFTY and build our numbers. Presently, every student in our high school is automatically a member of our youth group. But less than half attend youth group events consistently.
- This program has been neglected for many years but is now on track and slowly building in a positive direction.

- We are experiencing a lull in our TYG while we search for an advisor. However, we expect a surge of participants as our middle school gets older.
- We are having difficulties with our youth group—too many school activities in addition to a very strong BBYO presence makes it hard to get our kids involved in the teen youth group. We do, however, have a bit more success with our junior youth group and programming for grades 4 and 5.
- We are only now putting renewed energy into rebuilding our youth program.
- We re-began a youth group when I became the Religious School director four years ago. It has been a slow process to re-educate the congregation that there is more to being Jewish than just attending Religious School.
- We've had a meeting or two, but people weren't that enthusiastic.
- Youth group is weak. However, there are about 20 madrichim who come on a regular basis to work in the Religious School on Sundays. For some, this is their youth group experience. They work, schmooze, and socialize.
- We do not have an active TYG. We suggest that our interested teens join the Youth Group of a sister congregation. Few do.
- We do not have our own Temple Youth Group. Several of our students participate in Young Judea, which our temple co-sponsors (although it is run by the other synagogue in town).

- We have a full calendar that includes 2 events per month. We have 42 members. Each event has 20 to 25 students.
- We have a junior and senior youth group. Senior youth group averages 6 members per event. Junior youth group averages 12 to 15.
- We have better participation in regional events compared to local events.
- We have a thriving Youth Group. Three members are also on NFTY regional board. We also have a MEITAV fellow and many high caliber students who constantly look for more ways to be active in our youth program. We host regional and inter-congregational Youth Group events each year.

According to the URJ Portraits of Learning Study, only 10 percent of the congregations strongly agreed and 45 percent agreed that “For the young people in our congregation, the Reform movement provides them with an identity and/or sense of what type of person they desire to become.”

## **Conclusion**

TYGs provide an environment where teens can grow socially and emotionally, strengthen their identity as Jews, form relationships with peers and adults, and feel part of a Jewish community and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. They are “at home” in the congregation, having found a place where others know who they are and care about them. NFTY teens tend to find adult Jewish role models within their congregations who inspire them to continue learning, growing, and participating as active Jews now and in the future. TYGs serve as social networks in which youth feel that the congregation is a

place where throughout their lifetime they can safely seek support for their well being. What TYGs are less successful at is making prayer, study, and God valued components of Jewish life.

TYGs are part of most congregational systems, yet visioning, thinking, and programming about youth is still not entirely systemic in congregations. TYG is not a regular part of most congregational formal educational meetings. The part-time nature of the youth directors' work raises questions about their inclusion in planning meetings of senior staff and the representation of holistic teen thinking within congregations. Work remains to create an integrated vision of formal and informal education including TYG on the congregational level.

Youth group advisors are a critical component of providing a safe and value-laden place in which teens are able to learn and develop during what may be turbulent years for them. The youth group advisors help integrate teens into congregational life. Yet, most congregations have part-time youth directors so the field is under professionalized in comparison to educators who oversee congregational schools and other formal educational programs. Even though it is not pragmatic for all congregations to have full time youth directors, what does need to be considered is their professional development, salaries, and benefits as it relates to their effectiveness. Across North America, the Educators in Jewish Schools Study (Ben-Avie and Kress, in press) show that communities are pulling together many part-time jobs so that they are able to create full-time positions for educators. It is best for all if advisors are not only able but also contracted to participate in key planning meetings and congregational events as well as

NFTY regional and continental programs both for their youth and their own professional growth.

TYGs have youth that are very engaged in congregational and Jewish life and in the Reform movement. The teens fit the profile of “the more, the more,” that is, the more involvement in Jewish life and the more positive the connections, the more likely that they will continue to be engaged in Jewish life as adults. The profile of these teens raises questions for further investigation about who tends not to participate in a youth group and why not?

- Do parents realize that youth groups provide “whole child development” benefits in conjunction with promoting the youth’s adherence to the Jewish people, past and present? TYGs are emotionally and socially safe environments filled with good adult and peer role models for exploring life situations and questions that arise as teens.
- Do those young people who only attend the congregational school have the same sense of belonging to the Jewish people and to the congregation as those who also participate in youth group? If not, what can be learned from the youth groups about building community and fostering a sense of belonging for those who only attend the congregational school?

The take-home message of the URJ Portraits of Learning Study is that there are congregations designing what may be termed “complementary configurations of education” (see Cremin, 1976). In a “complementary configuration of education,” home, school, youth group, camp, family education, congregation life, community are not



considered separate programmatic entities. Everyone is a "child developer." At times, educators and congregation members may promote the youth's learning and development at retreats or during Shabbat morning "cosmic conversations" led each week by a different member of the congregation. At other times, the active promotion of their learning and development may occur during a summer at a camp or during the school year in a congregational school or youth group. The well-functioning of the youth group is a shared responsibility, and not only the responsibility of educators and those who are involved in the congregation's youth or education programs. In this way, the congregation is able to provide developmental experiences for youth that are of sufficient intensity and duration, as measured by positive changes in teens' cognitions, emotions, actions, and partaking of community.

In parallel, the same challenge can be applied to URJ as a whole to create a complementary configuration of education that encompasses NFTY, camps, Israel experience, day schools, congregational programs for adults and youth. When everyone is a child developer in a complementary configuration of education, "adult agendas" are put aside on behalf of youth's learning and development. All decisions are made in the best interests of youth.

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